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# Crossing the Line: What Counts as Online Harassment?

Americans agree that certain behaviors constitute online harassment, but they are more divided on others

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#### **Crossing the Line: What Counts as Online Harassment?**

Americans agree that certain behaviors constitute online harassment, but they are more divided on others

Pew Research Center surveys have found that online harassment is a <u>common phenomenon</u> in the digital lives of many Americans, and that a majority of Americans feel harassment online is a major problem. Even so, there is considerable debate over what online harassment actually means in practice.

In an effort to examine more deeply where people "draw the line" when it comes to online harassment, the Center conducted a survey in which respondents were presented with fictional scenarios depicting different types of escalating online interactions. The survey then asked them to indicate which specific elements of the story they considered to be harassment.

Their answers indicate that Americans broadly agree that certain behaviors are beyond the pale. For instance, in various contexts most agree that online harassment occurs when people make direct personal threats against others. At the same time, the public is much more divided over whether or not other behaviors – such as sending unkind messages or publicly sharing a private conversation – constitute online harassment.

In two vignettes, respondents were asked if and when the social media platforms where the incidents were occurring should have stepped in and addressed the unfolding events. Again, majorities agree that the platforms should step in to address behaviors such as threatening messages. But public views are more split when it comes to the responsibilities of the platforms at other points in these incidents.

## Scenario 1: A private disagreement between friends that becomes public and escalates in severity

People's perceptions of online harassment incidents can often depend on who is involved in the conflict, as well as whether that conflict plays out publicly or in private. The first scenario in the survey presented respondents with an example of a private disagreement between a fictional character named "David" and his friend over a sensitive political issue. The conversation begins in a private messaging thread but then becomes public and escalates in severity:

"David and his friend are messaging privately about a sensitive political issue on which they disagree. David says something that offends his friend, who forwards the conversation to some

people they know. One of those people shares the conversation publicly on a social media account, and David receives unkind messages from strangers. The original conversation is then reposted on an account with thousands of followers, and David receives messages that are vulgar. Eventually someone posts David's phone number and home address online, and David starts to receive threatening messages."

The vast majority of Americans (89%) agree that David does experience online harassment at some point in this conflict. Just 4% feel that he does *not* experience online harassment at least somewhere during the episode, and 7% say they are not sure if he was harassed or not. Although there are some modest demographic differences on this question, sizable majorities of Americans across a wide range of groups agree that this scenario as a whole does in fact involve online harassment.

## There is broad public consensus that behaviors such as threatening messages, posting of personal information without consent constitute online harassment

Given the following scenario ...

David and his friend are messaging privately about a sensitive political issue on which they disagree.

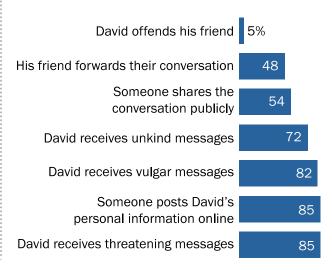
David says something that offends his friend, who forwards the conversation to some people they know.

One of those people shares the conversation publicly on a social media account, and David receives unkind messages from strangers. The original conversation is then reposted on an account with thousands of followers, and David receives messages that are vulgar. Eventually someone posts David's phone number and home address online, and David starts to receive threatening messages.

Source: Survey conducted March 13-27, 2017. "Crossing the Line: What Counts as Online Harassment?"

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% of U.S. adults who consider it online harassment when ...



When asked to identify which specific elements of the scenario they consider online harassment, only a small share of Americans (5%) think the initial disagreement when David offends his friend qualifies. The public is more evenly divided on the next two elements of the scenario: 48% think it constitutes online harassment when David's friend forwards their private conversation to other people, while 52% do not deem it harassment. Similarly, 54% say it counts as harassment when someone then shares the conversation publicly on social media, while 46% think it does not.

There is relatively broad consensus on the remaining elements of the scenario. Substantial shares of Americans think David experiences online harassment when he begins to receive unkind messages from strangers (72%), when those messages become vulgar (82%), when his personal information is posted online (85%), and when he starts to receive threatening messages (85%).

#### Views of this scenario differ little based on the gender of the main character

The gender of the scenario's lead character has little impact on Americans' perceptions of whether online harassment did or did not occur in this situation. A separate group of respondents was given an identical scenario to consider but with a woman as the lead character instead of a man. Some 91% of Americans feel that the scenario involving a female protagonist qualifies as online harassment, compared with 89% in the scenario involving a man. And their responses to the specific elements of the story are also nearly identical in each version.

#### Scenario 2: Harassment involving sexism

The second scenario in the survey used a story involving a character named Julie to explore how Americans view online harassment issues involving sexism and sexual harassment:

"Julie posts on her social media account, defending one side of a controversial political issue. A few people reply to her, with some supporting and some opposing her. As more people see her post, Julie receives unkind messages. Eventually her post is shared by a popular blogger with thousands of followers, and Julie receives vulgar messages that insult her looks and sexual behavior. She also notices people posting pictures of her that have been edited to include sexual images. Eventually, she receives threatening messages."

As was true in the preceding scenario, the vast majority of Americans (89%) agree that Julie does indeed experience online harassment at some point in this scenario. Another 6% feel that Julie was not harassed at any point in the encounter, while 5% say they are unsure if this scenario involves harassment or not.

And as was the case in the preceding scenario, the public has differing views on which aspects of this story represent online harassment. A very small share of Americans (3%) think Julie's initial disagreement with her friends counts as online harassment. Some 43% consider it harassment when she begins to receive unkind messages, while around one-in-five (17%) consider it harassment when her post is shared by the popular blogger with thousands of followers. Meanwhile, substantial majorities of Americans think Julie is being harassed when she receives vulgar messages about her looks and sexual behavior (85%), when her picture is edited to include sexual images (84%), and when she receives threatening messages (85%).

Along with asking respondents to identify which specific elements of this scenario count as online harassment, this scenario included a second set of questions about when – if it all – people think the social media service where this incident was occurring should have stepped in to address the behaviors in question. These findings indicate that the public has a somewhat different standard for behaviors that constitute online harassment, as opposed to behaviors that necessitate a response from online platforms.

#### Online sexual harassment: The public has a higher threshold for behaviors that constitute "online harassment" than for behaviors that necessitate a response from social media platforms

Given the following scenario ...

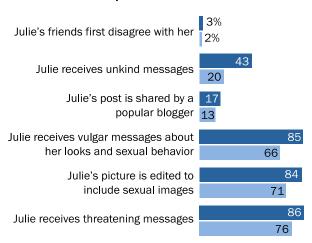
Julie posts on her social media account, defending one side of a controversial political issue. A few people reply to her, with some supporting and some opposing her. As more people see her post, Julie receives unkind messages. Eventually her post is shared by a popular blogger with thousands of followers, and Julie receives vulgar messages that insult her looks and sexual behavior. She also notices people posting pictures of her that have been edited to include sexual images. Eventually, she receives threatening messages.

Source: Survey conducted March 13-27, 2017.

"Crossing the Line: What Counts as Online Harassment?"

% of U.S. adults who say the following about each element of the scenario

- They consider it online harassment
- The social media platform should intervene



For example, some 43% of Americans consider it to be online harassment when Julie receives unkind messages from the people reading her post – but just 20% think that the platform should have stepped in to address that behavior when it occurred. The public's attitudes diverge in similar ways on some of the more severe behaviors in the scenario. Most prominently, 85% of Americans think that Julie experiences online harassment when she begins to receive vulgar messages about her looks and sexual behavior. But substantially fewer (although still a majority at 66%) think that the social media platform has an obligation to step in and address that behavior.

#### Women are more likely than men to view certain behaviors in this scenario as harassing

The vast majority of both men and women feel that Julie does in fact experience online harassment in this scenario. But at the same time, men and women respond somewhat differently to some of the specific elements of the scenario. Most notably, women are roughly three times as likely as men to consider it online harassment when Julie's post is shared on social media by the blogger (24% vs. 9%), and they are also substantially more likely to consider it harassment when Julie first begins to receive unkind messages (50% vs. 35%). And although roughly eight-in-ten men consider it harassment when Julie receives vulgar messages, when she sees people editing her picture to include sexual imagery, and when she receives threatening messages, in each case that point of view is shared by roughly nine-in-ten women.

#### Scenario 3: Harassment involving racism

The final scenario in the survey used a story involving a character named John to explore how Americans view online harassment issues in the context of racially motivated content. This scenario is nearly identical to the preceding one involving "Julie" and sexual harassment but with racial rather than sexual overtones:

"John posts on his social media account, defending one side of a controversial political issue. A few people reply to him, with some supporting and some opposing him. As more people see his post, John receives unkind messages. Eventually his post is shared by a popular blogger with thousands of followers, and John receives vulgar messages that make racial insults and use a common racial slur. He also notices people posting pictures of him that have been edited to include racially insensitive images. Eventually, he receives threatening messages."

In many ways, Americans' views on this scenario mirror those in the previous scenario involving sexual harassment. Fully 85% of adults believe John experiences online harassment in this

scenario, while 6% feel he does *not* face harassment, and 10% are unsure if this scenario involves online harassment or not.

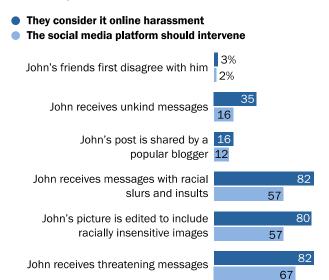
They also respond in largely similar ways when asked which specific elements of the story constitute harassment. Very few Americans think that John's initial social media argument constitutes online harassment, but sizable majorities agree that John experiences harassment when he receives vulgar messages with racially insulting language (82%), when his picture is edited to include racially insensitive images (80%), and when he receives personal threats (82%).

# Online racial harassment: The public has a higher threshold for behaviors that constitute "online harassment" than for behaviors that necessitate a response from social media platforms

Given the following scenario ...

John posts on his social media account, defending one side of a controversial political issue. A few people reply to him, with some supporting and some opposing him. As more people see his post, John receives unkind messages. Eventually his post is shared by a popular blogger with thousands of followers, and John receives vulgar messages that make racial insults and use a common racial slur. He also notices people posting pictures of him that have been edited to include racially insensitive images. Eventually, he receives threatening messages.

% of U.S. adults who say the following about each element of the scenario



Source: Survey conducted March 13-27, 2017. "Crossing the Line: What Counts as Online Harassment?"

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And as with the case of the scenario involving sexual content, Americans have a somewhat different threshold for behavior that constitutes online harassment as opposed to behavior that deserves a response by the social media platform hosting that behavior. For instance, 80% of

Americans think it constitutes online harassment when people begin posting pictures of John that include racially insensitive imagery, but 57% think that the social media service should have stepped in to address that behavior.

## Slightly larger share of the public thinks social media platforms should step in for behaviors involving sexual harassment than for behaviors involving racial harassment

The scenarios involving "John" and "Julie" are generally identical in content, with the former involving explicitly racial content and the latter involving sexual content. Overall, similar shares of Americans view these scenarios as involving online harassment at some point. But slightly larger shares of the public — although a majority of Americans in each instance — think the social media platform should have stepped in at various times during the scenario involving Julie, as opposed to the scenario involving John:

- 66% of Americans think the social media service should have stepped in when Julie receives vulgar messages that insult her looks and sexual behavior, but that share falls to 57% for the scenario where John receives vulgar messages involving racial slurs and insults.
- 71% think the platform should have stepped in when people post pictures of Julie online that included sexual images, but 57% feel that intervention is required when pictures of David are posted that include racially insensitive images.
- 76% think intervention is required when Julie begins to receive threatening messages, but that share falls to 67% in the scenario involving David.

#### **Acknowledgments**

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#### Methodology

The American Trends Panel (ATP), created by Pew Research Center, is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults recruited from landline and cellphone random-digit-dial surveys. Panelists participate via monthly self-administered web surveys. Panelists who do not have internet access are provided with a tablet and wireless internet connection. The panel is being managed by Abt SRBI.

Data in this report are drawn from the panel wave conducted March 13-27, 2017, among 4,151 respondents. The margin of sampling error for the full sample of 4,151 respondents is plus or minus 2.7 percentage points.

Members of the American Trends Panel were recruited from two large, national landline and cellphone random-digit-dial (RDD) surveys conducted in English and Spanish. At the end of each survey, respondents were invited to join the panel. The first group of panelists was recruited from the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey, conducted Jan. 23-March 16, 2014. Of the 10,013 adults interviewed, 9,809 were invited to take part in the panel and a total of 5,338 agreed to participate. The second group of panelists was recruited from the 2015 Survey on Government, conducted Aug. 27-Oct. 4, 2015. Of the 6,004 adults interviewed, all were invited to join the panel, and 2,976 agreed to participate.

The ATP data were weighted in a multi-step process that begins with a base weight incorporating the respondents' original survey selection probability and the fact that in 2014 some panelists were subsampled for invitation to the panel. Next, an adjustment was made for the fact that the propensity to join the panel and remain an active panelist varied across different groups in the sample. The final step in the weighting uses an iterative technique that aligns the sample to population benchmarks on a number of dimensions. Gender, age, education, race, Hispanic origin and region parameters come from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2015 American Community Survey. The county-level population density parameter (deciles) comes from the 2010 U.S. Decennial Census. The telephone service benchmark is comes from the January-June 2016 National Health Interview Survey and is projected to 2017. The volunteerism benchmark comes from the 2015 Current Population Survey Volunteer Supplement. The party affiliation benchmark is the average of the three most recent Pew Research Center general public telephone surveys. The internet-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> When data collection for the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey began, non-internet users were subsampled at a rate of 25%, but a decision was made shortly thereafter to invite all non-internet users to join. In total, 83% of non-internet users were invited to join the panel.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Respondents to the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey who indicated that they are internet users but refused to provide an email address were initially permitted to participate in the American Trends Panel by mail, but were no longer permitted to join the panel after Feb. 6, 2014. Internet users from the 2015 Survey on Government who refused to provide an email address were not permitted to join the panel.

access benchmark comes from the 2015 Pew Survey on Government. Respondents who did not previously have internet access are treated as not having internet access for weighting purposes. Sampling errors and statistical tests of significance take into account the effect of weighting. Interviews are conducted in both English and Spanish, but the Hispanic sample in the American Trends Panel is predominantly native born and English speaking.

The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

Group	Unweighted sample size	Plus or minus
Total sample	4,151	2.7
Scenario 1 (David, private conversation goes public)	1,005	5.4 percentage points
Scenario 2 (Julie, private conversation goes public)	1,096	5.2 percentage points
Scenario 3 (Julie, sexual content)	993	5.5 percentage points
Scenario 4 (John, racial content)	1,057	5.3 percentage points

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

The March 2017 wave had a response rate of 80% (4,151 responses among 5,177 individuals in the panel). Taking account of the combined, weighted response rate for the recruitment surveys (10.0%) and attrition from panel members who were removed at their request or for inactivity, the cumulative response rate for the wave is 2.6 %.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Approximately once per year, panelists who have not participated in multiple consecutive waves are removed from the panel. These cases are counted in the denominator of cumulative response rates.

#### **Topline questionnaire**

# 2017 PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S AMERICAN TRENDS PANEL WAVE 25 MARCH FINAL TOPLINE March 13-27, 2017 TOTAL N=4,151<sup>4</sup>

#### [RANDOMLY ASSIGN PARTICIPANTS TO RECEIVE <u>ONE</u> OF THE FOLLOWING FOUR VIGNETTES; VIGNETTE=1, 2, 3 or 4]

#### ASK IF VIGNETTE=1 [N=1,005]:

Please think about the following situation...

David and his friend are messaging privately about a sensitive political issue on which they disagree. David says something that offends his friend, who forwards the conversation to some people they know. One of those people shares the conversation publicly on a social media account, and David receives unkind messages from strangers. The original conversation is then reposted on an account with thousands of followers, and David receives messages that are vulgar. Eventually someone posts David's phone number and home address online, and David starts to receive threatening messages.

V1Q1 In your opinion, did David experience online harassment in this situation?

Mar 13-Mar 27	
<u>2017</u>	
89	Yes
4	No
7	Not sure
0	No answer

#### AMONG VIGNETTE=1 [N=1,005]:

V1Q2

Which parts, if any, of David's experience do you consider to be online harassment? **[SHOW ITEMS IN ORDER]** 

[Check all that apply]

		<u>Selected</u>	Not selected /No answer
a.	When David offends his friend Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	5	95
b.	When David's friend forwards their private conversation to others Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	48	52
c.	When someone shares the conversation publicly on social media Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	54	46

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The Wave 25 survey was administered exclusively in web mode. The survey included N=181 previous mail mode panelists that were converted to web and were provided an internet-enabled tablet if necessary.

		Selected	Not selected /No answer
d.	When David receives unkind messages Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	72	28
e.	When David receives vulgar messages Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	82	18
f.	When David's phone number and home address are posted online Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	85	15
g.	When David receives threatening messages Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	85	15
h.	None of these <b>[EXCLUSIVE PUNCH]</b> Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	2	92

#### ASK IF VIGNETTE=2 [N=1,096]:

Please think about the following situation...

Julie and her friend are messaging privately about a sensitive political issue on which they disagree. Julie says something that offends her friend, who forwards the conversation to some people they know. One of those people shares the conversation publicly on a social media account, and Julie receives unkind messages from strangers. The original conversation is then reposted on an account with thousands of followers, and Julie receives messages that are vulgar. Eventually someone posts Julie's phone number and home address online, and Julie starts to receive threatening messages.

V2Q1 In your opinion, did Julie experience online harassment in this situation?

Mar 13-Mar 27	
<u>2017</u>	
91	Yes
4	No
5	Not sure
*	No answer

#### AMONG VIGNETTE=2 [N=1,096]:

V2Q2

Which parts, if any, of Julie's experience do you consider to be online harassment? [SHOW ITEMS IN ORDER]

[Check all that apply]

		<u>Selected</u>	Not selected /No answer
a.	When Julie offends her friend Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	3	97
b.	When Julie's friend forwards their private conversation to others Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	54	46
c.	When someone shares the conversation publicly on social media Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	58	42
d.	When Julie receives unkind messages Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	71	29
e.	When Julie receives vulgar messages Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	79	21
f.	When Julie's phone number and home address are posted online Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	82	18
g.	When Julie receives threatening messages Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	85	15
h.	None of these <b>[EXCLUSIVE PUNCH]</b> Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	2	98

#### ASK IF VIGNETTE=3 [N=993]:

Please think about the following situation...

Julie posts on her social media account, defending one side of a controversial political issue. A few people reply to her, with some supporting and some opposing her. As more people see her post, Julie receives unkind messages. Eventually her post is shared by a popular blogger with thousands of followers, and Julie receives vulgar messages that insult her looks and sexual behavior. She also notices people posting pictures of her that have been edited to include sexual images. Eventually, she receives threatening messages.

V3Q1 In your opinion, did Julie experience online harassment in this situation?

Mar 13-Mar 27

2017

89

6

No

5

Not sure

\*

No answer

#### AMONG VIGNETTE=3 [N=993]:

V3Q2

Which parts, if any, of Julie's experience do you consider to be online harassment? [SHOW ITEMS IN ORDER]

[Check all that apply]

a.	When some of Julie's friends first disagree	<u>Selected</u>	Not selected /No answer
	with her Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	3	97
b.	When Julie receives unkind messages Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	43	57
c.	When Julie's post is shared on social media by the blogger Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	17	83
d.	When Julie receives vulgar messages about her looks and sexual behavior Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	85	15
e.	When Julie's picture is edited to include sexual images Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	84	16
f.	When Julie receives threatening messages Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	86	24
g.	None of these <b>[EXCLUSIVE PUNCH]</b> Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	2	98

#### ASK IF VIGNETTE=3 [N=993]:

V3Q3

Do you think the social media service should have stepped in at any point during this situation?

Mar 13-Mar 27	
<u>2017</u>	
65	Yes
12	No
22	Not sure
*	No answer

#### **AMONG VIGNETTE=3 [N=993]:**

V3Q4.

At which points, if any, do you think the social media service should have stepped in? **[SHOW ITEMS IN ORDER]** 

[Check all that apply]

		<u>Selected</u>	Not selected /No answer
a.	When some of Julie's friends first disagree with her		
	Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	2	98
b.	When Julie receives unkind messages Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	20	80
C.	When Julie's post is shared on social media by the blogger Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	13	87
d.	When Julie receives vulgar messages about her looks and sexual behavior Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	66	34
e.	When Julie's picture is edited to include sexual images Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	71	29
f.	When Julie receives threatening messages Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	76	24
g.	None of these <b>[EXCLUSIVE PUNCH]</b> Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	3	97

#### ASK IF VIGNETTE=4 [N=1,057]:

Please think about the following situation...

John posts on his social media account, defending one side of a controversial political issue. A few people reply to him, with some supporting and some opposing him. As more people see his post, John receives unkind messages. Eventually his post is shared by a popular blogger with thousands of followers, and John receives vulgar messages that make racial insults and use a common racial slur. He also notices people posting pictures of him that have been edited to include racially insensitive images. Eventually, he receives threatening messages.

V4Q1 In your opinion, did John experience online harassment in this situation?

Mar 13-Mar 27	
<u>2017</u>	
85	Yes
6	No
10	Not sure
*	No answer

#### AMONG VIGNETTE=4 [N=1,057]:

V4Q2

Which parts, if any, of John's experience do you consider to be online harassment? [SHOW ITEMS IN ORDER]

[Check all that apply]

a.	When some of John's followers first	<u>Selected</u>	Not selected /No answer
	disagree with him Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	3	97
b.	When John receives unkind messages Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	35	65
C.	When John's post is shared on social media by the blogger Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	16	84
d.	When John receives vulgar messages with racially insulting language Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	82	18
e.	When John's picture is edited to include racially insensitive images Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	80	20
f.	When John receives personal threats Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	82	18
g.	None of these <b>[EXCLUSIVE PUNCH]</b> Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	4	96

ASK IF VIGNETTE=4 [N=1,057]:
V4Q3 Do you think the social media service should have stepped in at any point during this situation?

Mar 13-Mar 27	
<u>2017</u>	
54	Yes
19	No
27	Not sure
*	No answer

AMONG VIGNETTE=4 [N=1,057]:

V4Q4 At which points, if any, do you think the social media service should have stepped in? [SHOW ITEMS IN ORDER]

[Check all that apply]

a.	When some of John's followers first	<u>Selected</u>	Not selected /No answer
	disagree with him Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	2	98
b.	When John receives unkind messages Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	16	84
c.	When John's post is shared on social media by the blogger Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	12	88
d.	When John receives vulgar messages with racially insulting language Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	57	43
e.	When John's picture is edited to include racially insensitive images Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	57	43
f.	When John receives personal threats Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	67	33
g.	None of these <b>[EXCLUSIVE PUNCH]</b> Mar 13-Mar 27, 2017	3	97